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ABSTRACT

Good books can help children develop pride in their ethnic identity, knowledge about cultural history and positive role models, and improved self-esteem. However, Mexican American students often do not experience literature in this way. This digest briefly reviews Mexican American children's literature, recommends classroom strategies, provides literature selection guidelines, and suggests reading lists for various grade levels. Before 1990, few children's books with Mexican American themes were published. The past decade has seen increased dissemination of minority literature and national recognition of Mexican American authors. Using effective classroom strategies and selecting the best literature for particular groups of students are key to promoting reading among Mexican American students. Ten strategies help teachers to expand their own knowledge of available literature, influencing school district choices, incorporating multicultural readers and trade books, and involving parents and local Mexican American authors. A checklist provides nine guidelines for selecting appropriate classroom literature. A total of 67 books are recommended in the following age categories: grades pre-K-3, grades 4-6, grades 7-9, and grades 10-12. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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Promoting Reading Among Mexican American Children

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Literature addresses the universal need for stories. Stories are most meaningful and best able to promote literacy when they speak to a student's world. Good books can help children develop pride in their ethnic identity, provide positive role models, develop knowledge about cultural history, and build self-esteem. However, Mexican American students in the United States often do not experience literature in this way. This Digest identifies key challenges, recommends classroom strategies, provides literature selection guidelines, and suggests reading lists for various grade levels.

Mexican American Children's Literature

Literary works written for or by Mexican Americans were not represented in mainstream children's publications in the United States until the 1940s. Beginning in the 1940s, Mexican American literary characters were developed largely by European American writers who were removed from the cultural experience of the Mexican American minority. Consequently, portrayals of Mexican Americans reflected a rural existence and stereotypical images (Harris, 1993).

Between 1940 and 1973 there were only four or five books a year published on Mexican American themes by the major publishers of children's literature. Analyses from the late 1980s and early 1990s showed even fewer—only one to three books a year (Schon, 1988; Cortés, 1992). Of the approximately 5,000 children's books published annually by major publishers in the United States, books about or by Mexican Americans made up one tenth of 1%. These statistics reveal the persistent dearth of children's literature by Mexican American authors through the early 1990s. The literary genres were limited, too. Most were folklore, legends, and protest pieces (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993; Harris, 1993; Tatum, 1990; Schon, 1988).

In the early 1990s awareness of these issues resulted in the publication of growing numbers of books with Mexican American themes and authors. Small publishing houses such as Arte Público, Piñata Books, and Bilingual Review Press have increased dissemination of minority literature and helped launch writers such as Tomas Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, and Sandra Cisneros to national recognition (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993).

Classroom Strategies

Using effective classroom strategies and selecting the best literature for particular groups of students are the two pivots for promoting reading among Mexican American children. The following strategies can help Mexican-origin and other teachers improve both their methods for promoting reading in the classroom and their students' cultural understanding (Murray, 1998a; Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993; Escamilla, 1992; Galda, 1991; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986):

- Explore Mexican American culture, history, and contemporary society through texts such as *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas 1836-1986* (Montejano, 1987), *The Hispanic Americans* (Meltzer, 1982), or *The Mexicans in America* (Pinchot, 1989).
- Consult book reviews, such as those in *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers* (Miller-Lachmann, 1992).
- Take an ethnic literature course. From the 1960s to the present, a growing body of literature written by or for Mexican Americans has emerged.
- Include multicultural readers in the secondary level curriculum, such as *Mexican American Literature* (Tatum, 1990) or *Arrivals: Cross-cultural Experience in Literature* (Huizenga, 1995).
- Incorporate trade books whenever possible, using selection criteria (see Reviewing Literature and Selecting The Best, below).
- When possible, invite local Mexican American authors to talk with or read to classes. Correspond with one or more authors located through Web sites.
- Participate in school district committees that select curriculum materials. Make a case for including various U.S. minority group histories and literatures to be studied as serious literary works.
- Request in-service seminars by university and school district experts on the use of Mexican American literature and interdisciplinary instruction.
- Organize a committee of volunteer parents to suggest or review selections of readings for the class.
- Invite minority parents or grandparents to present oral traditions by sharing family histories or experiences. Written collections of their stories could be included in the school library.

Reviewing Literature and Selecting The Best

The following checklist provides a few important guidelines for selecting appropriate classroom literature (Murray, 1998b; Escamilla, 1992; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986):

- ❑ Does the selection present specific and accurate information about the culture?
- ❑ Do the illustrations and/or text reflect the diversity of the people or do they reflect stereotypes?
- ❑ Are Mexican-origin characters depicted in active (not passive or submissive) roles?
- ❑ Does the story line and/or character development lend itself to a universal interpretation?
- ❑ Does the narrative voice in the selection come from a perspective within the culture?
- ❑ If the cultural elements were removed, would there be a developed plot structure?
- ❑ Is the culture presented in a positive way? Do the characters come to a constructive resolution of conflicts? Are the characters multidimensional?
- ❑ Can mainstream works (i.e., literary canon) parallel the themes, issues, or characters of the selection? Identify them, then compare and discuss.
- ❑ Are the Spanish words or phrases in the text understandable within the context of the sentences? Is there a glossary?

Suggested Selections by Grade Levels

The following authors and works have been reviewed (Murray, 1998a) and represent some of the authentic within-the-culture perspectives available today.

GRADES PRE-K-3:

Abuela by Arthur Dorros (Elisa Kleven, illustrator)
A Birthday Basket for Tía by Pat Mora (Cecily Lang, illustrator)

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Arroz con Leche by Lulu Delacre (author and illustrator)
Diego by Jonah Winter (Jeanette Winter, illustrator)
Family Pictures: Cuadros de familia by Carmen Lomas Garza
Hairs: Pelitos by Sandra Cisneros (Terry Ybañez, illustrator)
I Speak English for My Mom by Muriel Stanek (Judith Friedman, illustrator)
Juan Tuza and the Magic Pouch by Francisco X. Mora (author and illustrator)
Listen to the Desert: Oye al desierto by Pat Mora (Francisco X. Mora, illustrator)
Mr. Sugar Came to Town: La Vista del Sr. Azúcar by Harriet Rohmer
Pablo's Tree by Pat Mora (Cecily Lang, illustrator)
Patchwork Colcha: A Children's Collection by Carmen Tafolla
Pupurupú: Cuentos de Niños by Larry Daste (Sabine Ulibarrí, illustrator)
The Wedding of Don Octavio by Patricia Zelver
The Woman Who Knew the Language of the Animals by Denise Chavez
Tomás and the Library Lady by Pat Mora (Raúl Colón, illustrator)
Too Many Tamales by Gary Soto (Ed Martinez, illustrator)

GRADES 4-6

The Adventures of Connie and Diego by Maria García (Malaquias Montoya, illustrator)
Calor by Amado Peña (illustrator) & Juanita Alba
Hector Lives in the United States Now: The Story of a Mexican-American Child by Joan Hewett
How We Came to the Fifth World: A Creation Story from Ancient Mexico (Tales of the Americas) adapted by Harriet Rohmer, Mary Anchondo (Graciela Carrillo DeLopez, illustrator)
Maria Molina and the Days of the Dead by Kathleen Krull (Enrique O. Sanchez, illustrator)
Rosita's Christmas Wish by Mary Ann Smothers Bruni
Saturday Market by Patricia Grossman (Enrique O. Sanchez, illustrator)
Sonnets to Human Beings and Other Selected Works by Carmen Tafolla
The Cat's Meow by Gary Soto (Joe Cepeda, illustrator)
The Farolitos of Christmas by Rudolfo Anaya (Edward Gonzales, illustrator)
The Maldonado Miracle by Theodore Taylor
The Piñata Maker: El Piñatero by George Ancona
The Woman Who Outshone the Sun: The Legend of Lucía Zenteno by Alejandro Cruz Martinez, Rosalma Zubizarreta (Fernando Olivera, illustrator)

GRADES 7-9:

Baseball in April by Gary Soto
Cool Salsa by Lori Carlson
El Mago by Ron Arias
Everybody Knows Tobie by Daniel Garza
Friends from the Other Side by Gloria Anzaldúa
I Can Hear the Cowbells Ring by Lionel García
Hispanic, Female and Young: An Anthology edited by Phyllis Tashlik
Latino Voices by Frances Aparicio
Mexican American Literature (anthology) edited by Charles Tatum
Neighborhood Odes by Gary Soto
Quinceañera: A Latina's Journey to Womanhood by Mary Lankford
Taking Sides by Gary Soto
The Anaya Reader by Rudolfo Anaya
The Challenge by Rudolfo Anaya

GRADES 10-12:

Barrio Boy by Ernesto Galarza
Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya
Chicano by Richard Vasquez
Fair Gentlemen of Belken County by Rolando Hinojosa-Smith
Get Your Tortillas Together by Carmen Tafolla
Heart of Aztlán by Rudolfo A. Anaya
Inheritance of Strangers by Nash Candelaria
Latino Rainbow by Carlos Cumpián
Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel
Mi Abuela Fumaba Puros: My Grandma Smoked Cigars by Sabine Ulibarri
New Chicana: Chicano Writing edited by Charles Tatum
Oddsplayer by Joe Rodríguez
Pieces of the Heart by Gary Soto
Pocho by José Antonio Villarreal
Rituals of Survival: A Woman's Portfolio by Nicholasa Mohr
Schoolland: A Novel by Max Martinez
The Day the Cisco Kid Shot John Wayne by Nash Candelaria
The Earth Did Not Devour Him by Tomás Rivera
The Heart of Aztlán by Rudolfo Anaya
The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros
The Iguana Killer by Alberto Ríos
The Road to Tamazunchale by Ron Arias
Tortuga by Rudolfo Anaya

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